

Hobbes, Locke, and
Confusion's Masterpiece

*An Examination of Seventeenth-Century
Political Philosophy*

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

<http://www.cambridge.org>

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First published 2003

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeface ITC New Baskerville 10/13.5 pt. *System* L^AT_EX 2_ε [TB]

A catalog record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Harrison, Ross.

Hobbes, Locke, and confusion's masterpiece / T.R. Harrison.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-521-81700-5 (hardback) – ISBN 0-521-01719-X (pbk.)

1. Hobbes, Thomas, 1588–1679 – Contributions in political science.

2. Locke, John, 1632–1704 – Contributions in political science.

3. Political science – History – 17th century. 1. Title.

JC153.H66 H37 2002

320'.01-dc21 2002022279

ISBN 0 521 81700 5 hardback

ISBN 0 521 01719 X paperback

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Introduction

In this work, I explore some of the greatest and most important political philosophy ever written. I discuss masterpieces, but, as I shall show, these masterpieces appeared against a background of confusion. They were written in the seventeenth century, a conflicted, contested, multiply confused period. So, no doubt, were other centuries. However, in this case, the confusion brought forth masterpieces, and it is these masterpieces, in particular the great works of Hobbes and Locke, that I chiefly consider.

I take my title, *Confusion's Masterpiece*, from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, a work that was written near the start of the century being examined. In Shakespeare's play, just after discovery of the murdered King Duncan, comes the following speech:

Confusion now have made his masterpiece!
Most sacrilegious murder have broke ope
The Lord's anointed temple, and stole thence
The life o' the building!

The speaker is Macduff, the good man in the play, and foil to its eponymous, villainous hero. Eventually he restores the moral order by killing the villain, the king's murderer. For Macduff, as he shows here by his speech, the murder of a king destroys the established and understood order embodied in the king. Hence for Macduff (and hence also for well-thinking, proper opinion), murder of a king is the ultimate damaging act against order. It is, as he puts it, the masterpiece of confusion.

At this time in history, such order was generally taken to be established by God. So the king is here said by Macduff to be 'the Lord's anointed temple'. Therefore the villainous act is not just a fundamental breach of order in the political sphere, but also in the moral and religious sphere. It is sacrilege, defiling the temple of the Lord God. It is, as Macduff says, 'sacrilegious murder'.

Shakespeare was a member of the King's Players, the king's own theatre company. The king for whom Shakespeare was writing the play, King James (VI of Scotland, I of England), was associated with the doctrine that kings ruled by divine right. As King James frequently pointed out, God himself called kings gods. Speaking to his parliament (in 1610, four years after *Macbeth* was first performed), James told them that 'the state of monarchy is the supremest thing upon earth'. So they knew where they stood. He added that 'Kings are justly called Gods, for that they exercise a manner or resemblance of divine power upon earth'. They had heard that before. Even before James came to England, he had written a book, *The True Law of Free Monarchies* (1598). In it, he had already warmed to his favourite theme, writing that 'Kings are called Gods by the propheticall King David'. So that was how God told him. He spoke, in the Bible, through the mouth of the great King David. David calls kings 'the Lord's anointed', and even the great King David knows that he must not kill the Lord's anointed. Kings are anointed, the Lord's anointed temple. Reading the Bible tells us that killing a king is sacrilege.

So much might be clear to Macduff and to King James (and probably also to Shakespeare, who no doubt wrote what actors call 'The Scottish Play' to honour his new Scottish king). However, as Shakespeare himself observed in another play, there are many sad stories of the death of kings. Indeed, in England later that century, a king was executed. This was James's own son, King Charles I. Conflict, civil strife, confusion, confusion's masterpiece. In this case, kingly order was eventually restored. One way to see how right-thinking opinion attempted to make sense of these terrible events is by reading the church service written for the annual celebration of the Restoration. In it, the people promise 'all loyal and dutiful allegiance to thy Anointed Servant now set over us'. So we have a new king, but we still have allegiance to the anointed, God's holy temple. The people pray to be saved from 'the unnatural rebellion, usurpation, and tyranny of ungodly and cruel men, and

from the sad confusions and ruin thereupon ensuing'. So once we have violence against the Lord's anointed, we have 'confusions and ruin'.

With rebellion, we also have something said to be 'unnatural'. Earlier, King James was eager to stress that his untrammelled authority (above parliament and law) came not only from God but also from Nature. For him, the king was father to his people. Fathers naturally care for their children; children naturally respect their fathers. Rebellion was unnatural. Murder of the king, like murder inside the family, would be an 'unnatural' murder. (Shakespeare, in *Hamlet*, describes murder by a brother as 'most foul, bloody, and unnatural'.) Go against nature in this way and things become confused. Order is subverted. Consider God's law as laid down in the official translation of the day (the Authorised, or King James, version of the Bible, which appeared five years after *Macbeth*). This law forbids sexual relations between humans and animals. As the King James Bible translates the injunction, 'it is confusion' [*Leviticus* 18.23].

So much for the preservation of right order and the prevention of confusion. So much for the opinions of the right-thinking Macduffs of the time. Yet these so-called confused things actually happened. As we have seen, King James's own son was made confusion's masterpiece. Indeed, it almost happened to King James himself. In the year before *Macbeth* was performed, an attempt was made to blow him up together with his complete parliament (the 'Gunpowder Plot' – Guy Fawkes, 5 November 1605). Four days later, King James made another attempt to address his parliament, and this time he succeeded. He explained that 'kings are in the word of God himself called gods'. (Business as usual.) People heard about the divine power of kings, but clearly not everyone saw it that way; and if other views were possible, then more than mere assertion of authority was needed to decide who was right. James took God to be on his side, but his opponents, the plotters who attempted to blow him up, took God to be on their side. They also thought that they were fulfilling the work and wishes of God. They were Roman Catholics, a different version of the Christian religion, and they thought that God wanted another religious order in the country. They thought that God was in favour of their removal of heretical kings to bring this about. In spite of the divinity that for James shaped the ends of kings, they had other ideas, and if there are diverse ideas

and authorities, thought and argument are needed to work out who is right.

Just before Macduff enters and discovers the murdered Duncan, the porter of the castle listens to his knocking and pretends, with terrible unconscious irony, to be the porter of hell's gate. He describes people seeking admission to hell. Among them is 'an equivocator, that . . . committed treason enough for God's sake, yet could not equivocate to heaven'. These equivocators, these Jesuits, dissembled in their arguments, committed treason. They were the Gunpowder Plotters. For the porter, and for Shakespeare's audience, they went to hell. Yet they were there, and account had to be taken of their views. They might equivocate, juggle justifications two ways, but they were in the news.

The fictional murder of *Macbeth* is a work of the night. The murderer, Macbeth, consorts with witches; it is devil's work, fit only for hell. The real plotters against James also hid by night. It might be thought that the good thoughts of day, just as the good thoughts of Macduff, would be clearly against it. However, when King James's son came to be killed, it was done by public execution in the centre of London in the middle of the day. It followed publicly presented arguments and legal process. Again, religious differences were partly responsible. But here it was argued and fought out in the full light of day. Rebellion, civil war, England torn apart. Yet it was during this masterpiece of political confusion that Hobbes wrote his masterpiece about political confusion, *Leviathan*.

So we start the century with an idea of hierarchical order controlled by absolute kings, established and upheld by God. Religion runs for it, religion runs against it, religion gives other sources of validity and authority by means of which particular political arrangements can be questioned or defended. This raises questions of justification, and also of the possibility of alternative political arrangements. As well as the backing of God, there is the backing of Nature. Yet, in both cases, it can be questioned what real backing this gives. Other bases of justification can be produced, and so we are involved in political philosophy. The political philosophy was produced as a cure for the confusions of the time, but it is still read with great respect and care today.

This duality of appeal – both to its own time and to our own time – has difficulties and advantages. What we see in the thought of these great philosophers is inevitably the view from here (where

we have fewer kings and where religion is less called on for ultimate validation). How the hills look from here explains the landscape I intend to explore. Yet one aim of this work is to show how these distant impressions change once we get among the hills themselves. The historical writings that we now refer to for our own contemporary purposes were originally responses to quite different theoretical and practical situations, and (inevitably) formed by reaction to what came before them, rather than after. So, as well as discussing questions raised by such major thinkers as Hobbes, Locke, and Grotius in the abstract, I also wish to make more sense of these questions by showing how they arose in particular intellectual and historical contexts. Their philosophies have the advantage for us of being driven by high theory, which travels beyond ancient troubles and can be translated into contemporary concerns. The fundamental problems and solutions they raise and discuss are ones that we still can discuss, use, or criticise today. However, their philosophies also have the advantage of originating from real and pressing problems of political order on their own historical ground.

If philosophy starts with scepticism – the questioning of established ideas – these philosophies of the seventeenth century start with a very real form of scepticism, the questioning of established order implied by its destruction and confusion. The philosophers wrote amidst confusion, and so faced the real and pressing question of why and how there could be order. This is the historical reality, but more abstractly a fundamental question of political philosophy is the grounds and scope of political obligation. Before we decide what the state ought to do, we have to decide whether there should be a state at all. So the sceptical position with which political philosophy works is anarchism – the idea that no political claims are taken to have validity. Another fundamental, sceptical position is amoralism, so that no normative claims are allowed validity. Any answer to such scepticisms provides foundations. The extreme view would be to suppose that all that exists, or is of importance, are individual people, and that the only claims of reason on these people are the claims of individual self-interest. This is, in effect, to put the problem the way it was originally proposed by Hobbes. We start with individuals, and all reasons are in terms of individual interest. Any polity that can be argued for, or emerge, with so slim presuppositions will be dialectically robust.

The central problems here are the relation between individuals and their political communities – relations of power, of authority, of decision-making, of judgement. These are all discussed, first concentrating on Hobbes, later on Locke, although other major thinkers, including Grotius and Pufendorf, also appear. The problem is to find a normative foundation, and then apply these norms to discovering the right answers about government. I start the main treatment with Hobbes. However, history does not start with Hobbes. I attempt to remedy this to some extent in the first chapter, which aims to give some sense of the intellectually problematic world into which Hobbes and Locke were born. Yet much has inevitably been left out, and as well as omitting the classical and medieval foundations of modern political philosophy, I have not even brought out how much the Biblically influenced seventeenth century on which I concentrate was also a great consumer of Greek and Latin classics. Even in terms of political thought, the seventeenth century has natural and important predecessors I barely mention – Machiavelli, More, Bodin. The foundations of modern political thought (to take the title of a famous work by Quentin Skinner) lie further back (Skinner's two volumes stop before this century starts). However, I still hope that starting with the seventeenth century makes good intrinsic sense for the reasons I have indicated. What I aim to tell is not the whole story. It never could be. However, I hope that it is of interest as well as of importance.